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## INDUCTION AND INTUITION, ON THE CENTER FOR LAND USE INTERPRETATION'S METHODOLOGY

In early 2008, the Center for Land Use Interpretation came to Houston, Texas, as artists-in-residence with the University of Houston's Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts. I had only recently moved to the area myself. When I accepted my current position at Blaffer Gallery, I knew very little about the city and was surprised to learn that this sprawling metropolis is in fact the fourth-largest city in the United States by population with a land area greater than that of Los Angeles.<sup>1</sup> Houston may have a low profile in comparison to other large cities in the United States; however, its anonymity belies its economic power. ConocoPhillips, the city's wealthiest corporation, posted an astounding quarterly net income of \$4.37 billion in early 2008, and the Bayou City is second only to New York in the number of city-headquartered Fortune 500 companies.<sup>2</sup> Houston is often perceived as a city that exists on the margins of culture, but it is a sleeping giant positioned at the very center of today's energy concerns.

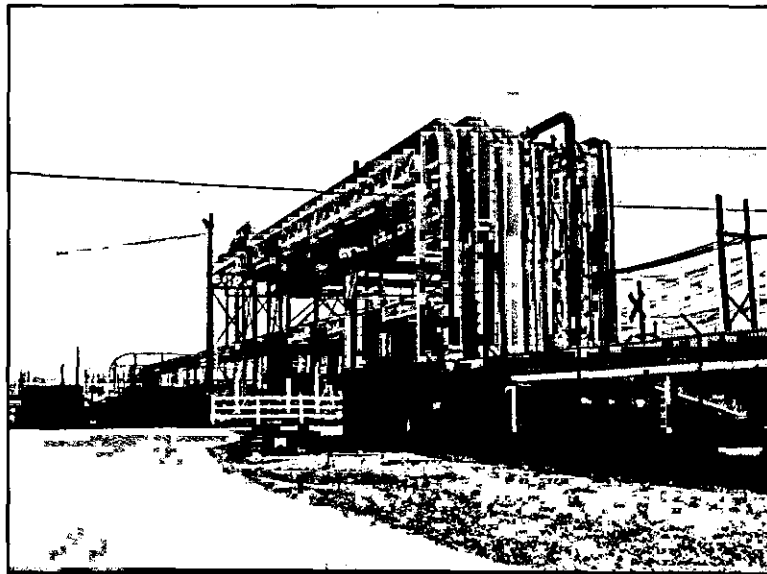
Yet not once did CLUI founder and director Matthew Coolidge or members Steve Rowell and Erik Knutzen ever mention such statistics about Houston during their residency. They did not quote numbers or percentages when working with UH creative writing, art, or architecture students on Buffalo Bayou. Instead, they pointed out bizarre juxtapositions of industrial and green space as they conducted boat tours and research trips with students, snapping pictures and inventing beautiful metaphors for the bayou, calling it a "digestive tract" collecting anything that falls into the storm drains and run-off water of the city, proof that there is no "away" to throwing things away.

The CLUI's pontoon boat tour down the bayou through the center of Houston allowed the students and me to see this rarely traveled waterway up close and in detail, revealing such hidden surprises as unused century-old railroad bridges and makeshift shelters accumulated under highway

<sup>1</sup> Figure 3: Top 40 Cities in the United States by Population: 2005 and Table C-1. Cities—Area and Population, *County and City Data Book: 2007*, U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/ccdb07.html>, accessed June 16, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> "Quarterly Profit Rises 37% at ConocoPhillips," *New York Times*.com, January 24, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/24/business/24conoco.html>, accessed June 16, 2008.

overpasses.<sup>3</sup> Most people first encounter Buffalo Bayou by crossing it on highways 45 and 59; some walk through parks and neighborhoods along its western banks. But there is very limited public access to the eastern half that runs from downtown Houston to the ship channel. Until recently, this section of the bayou was used mostly by industries such as a scrap metal yard and the city's sewage treatment plant. Thus, the boat tour through the



Pipelines crossing the street at a Deer Park petrochemical plant.

east bayou was subtly disorienting, as these rarely glimpsed sites lie not only in the heart of the city but in close proximity to the Houston Ship Channel, the main vein moving refined oil from Texas to the rest of the world.<sup>4</sup>

We are accustomed to directly observing only those aspects of the world that are part of our daily routines, while most of the infrastructure that supports our lifestyle goes unseen, from plumbing to the processing of the natural resources that power our homes and workplaces. These invisible forces can also serve as metaphors for intuitions that we cannot quite

3 Steve Rowell's photographs, many of which are reprinted in this book, capture these sites, as does Geoff Winningham in *Along Forgotten River: Photographs of Buffalo Bayou and the Houston Ship Channel, 1997–2001* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003).

4 See "Amidst a Petrochemical Wonderland: Points of View along the Houston Ship Channel," CLUI newsletter *Lay of the Land* (Summer 2004).

grasp, those things that we can visualize but cannot understand. In other words, the true nature of our civilization and the workings of our lives often lie beyond what we see, and even if we can see it, it can elude our attempts to fathom it. Beyond basic information, what can we say about the origin and function of materials such as concrete, water, and oil that constitute our day-to-day experience? We lack a basic epistemology of our material culture.

This is the challenge the CLUI has set out to face. It seeks a more complete understanding of the human relationship with the land and natural resources through the revelation of surprising facts. To this end, it is intent on improving the clarity and accuracy of its observations rather than proving any particular claims. That is an especially tough row to hoe when it comes to land use, a subject fraught with political conflicts that include the debate over how, when, where, and whether oil should be refined. The CLUI will present an exhibition at Blaffer Gallery on oil in Texas. But it is determined to avoid any agenda. It prides itself on producing books such as *The Nevada Test Site: A Guide to America's Nuclear Proving Ground*, which has been praised by antinuclear activists and Department of Energy officials alike.

The Center for Land Use Interpretation's mission statement proclaims that it is "dedicated to the increase and diffusion of information about how the nation's lands are apportioned, utilized, and perceived." Thus, its process is typically twofold: first, to conduct new research; and second, to present that research to the public. Step two of its method usually consists of writing entries for its Land Use Database; publishing collections of these entries; making multimedia exhibitions on certain themes or locations; and conducting tours of the sites that inspired its research. In its studies, the CLUI is more invested in discovery than overt analysis, and as it presents its findings, it leaves room for its audience to draw individual and independent conclusions.

As curator of the Center for Land Use Interpretation's exhibition *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry* at Blaffer Gallery, I have experienced the degree to which the CLUI's neutrality can make some people uneasy. Moreover, its liminal status between the worlds of art and science often confuses those who first encounter its work. Normally, an art museum champions subjectivities, yet here are artists/researchers who strive for objective observations. The CLUI's research-based presentations sound as if they could belong in a museum of natural history, yet its displays are informed

by a history of conceptual art and photography from Ed Ruscha to Henry Wessel. Both photographers have typically issued deadpan observations of land use in order to critique the homogeneity and excesses of a society that would pave expansive swaths of land just to have a space to store their vehicles, or encroach on the beauty of the western landscape with nearly identical tract homes. Many question whether the CLUI might have a similarly critical intent when documenting oil refineries, pipelines, and tankers. However, its members are unambiguous when it comes to their objective. They merely record and reflect; we may draw whatever conclusions or make whatever judgments we like.

Coolidge once elaborated on the CLUI's mission by saying, "One of the functions of a regional program is to characterize the region by describing its built landscape, and in this way to offer a portrait of its economy, its culture, and its identity."<sup>5</sup> In order to portray the built environment as accurately as possible, the CLUI follows a rigorously unbiased method of data collection. Its process is truly inductive and uses sensible experience rather than assumption as its starting point. First, someone observes an interesting use of land, such as an expansive manufacturing complex or a human-made lake, and reports it to the CLUI. If it is deemed sufficiently unusual or exemplary, independent field researchers fill out forms to identify basic information about the site: what it is called, what it is used for, where it is located, and to what keywords it might relate.<sup>6</sup> A site-characterization form is typically accompanied by photographs that, although often taken by professional artists and photographers, remain anonymous documents produced by the CLUI. These images offer an "independent view and a primary level of site verification."<sup>7</sup> Eventually, a paragraph is written, based on the site-characterization form, to accompany the photograph and encapsulate "the form and function of the site."<sup>8</sup> Members of the CLUI regularly review these land use entries, and if the site is recognized as sufficiently instructive or important, it is entered into a set of publicly accessible files stored in their Culver City offices known as the Land Use Database.<sup>9</sup> The database serves as the foundation for the

5 Matthew Coolidge, Introduction, in *Overlook: Exploring the Internal Fringes of America with the Center for Land Use Interpretation* (New York: Metropolis Books, 2006), 25.

6 *Ibid.*, 23–24.

7 *Ibid.*, 22.

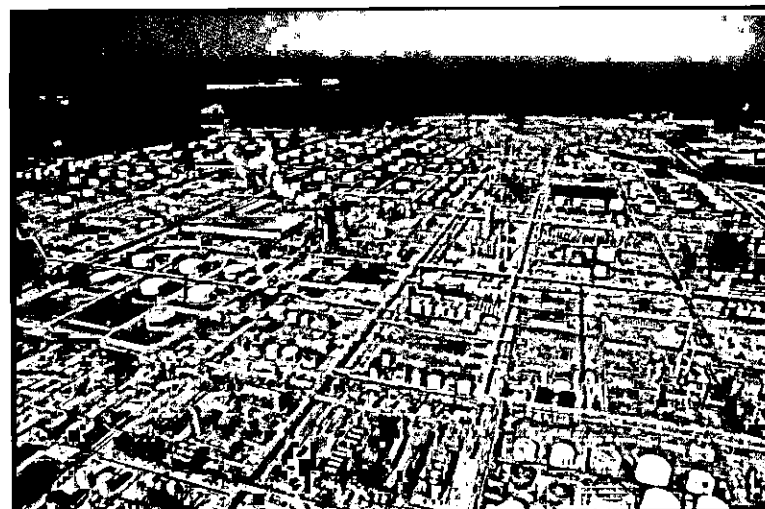
8 *Ibid.*, 22.

9 Selections from the database are available at <http://ludb.clui.org/>.

CLUI's programming in that its exhibitions and tours are drawn from the entries contained in these files.

Coolidge once described the CLUI's role as "tripping over the protruding artifacts of the present on the way to explaining the extraordinary conditions we all find ourselves in all the time. As we stumble over the obvious, we ask ourselves, 'What is that thing anyway, and how did it get there?'"<sup>10</sup> This process of empirically based inquiry is remarkably scientific with one important exception—the Center for Land Use Interpretation does not approach its subject matter with a hypothesis. The scientific method asks researchers to define a question, gather information, form a hypothesis, collect data, analyze and interpret that data, and form a new hypothesis. Instead, the steps the members of the CLUI follow in their research share some remarkable characteristics with the method espoused by seventeenth-century philosopher Francis Bacon (1561–1626), who founded the scientific revolution in 1620 with his influential treatise *New Organon*.

An important predecessor to our current scientific method, Bacon's induction focused on the collection, comparison, and selective exclusion of factual observations in order to ascertain more general patterns and axioms. In his introduction to *New Organon*, he declared, "Our method, though difficult to practice, is easy to formulate. It is to establish degrees of



ExxonMobil Baytown Plant and Houston Ship Channel.

10 Coolidge, Introduction, 17.

certainty...to open and construct a new and certain road for the mind from the actual perceptions of the senses."<sup>11</sup> The text is also a diatribe against so-called scientists who base their research on commonly accepted assumptions rather than proofs based on sound observations. To this end, Bacon is careful to distinguish "anticipations" from "interpretations." According to him, "Anticipations are much more powerful in winning assent than interpretations; they are gathered from just a few instances, especially those which are common and familiar, which merely brush past the intellect and fill the imagination. Interpretations by contrast are gathered piece by piece from things which are quite various and widely scattered, and cannot suddenly strike the intellect. So that...they cannot help seeming hard and incongruous, almost like mysteries of faith."<sup>12</sup> Bacon, like the CLUI, insists that well-founded knowledge is the result of liberating the mind from false tendencies that distort the truth and cause us to pay attention only to what we see on a regular basis rather than experiencing and understanding evidence that might be farther afield. This is the essence of the "interpretation" in the CLUI's name, a commitment to accuracy in the search for truth.

The fundamental understanding that reality is based on the relationship between a first-person perspective and empirical evidence is recognized by the philosophical traditions of phenomenology and positivism as well as, and perhaps most significantly in the context of this essay, the history of conceptual art. In one of his first lectures on the University of Houston campus, Coolidge quoted an observation that Marcel Duchamp made when he spoke at the Convention of the American Federation of Arts in Houston, Texas, in 1957: "All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act."<sup>13</sup> In referencing Duchamp and engaging in a quasi-scientific method, Coolidge hints that the CLUI's methodology bridges scientific and artistic traditions that regard the act of observation as the primary arena for an authentic experience and the determination of truth.

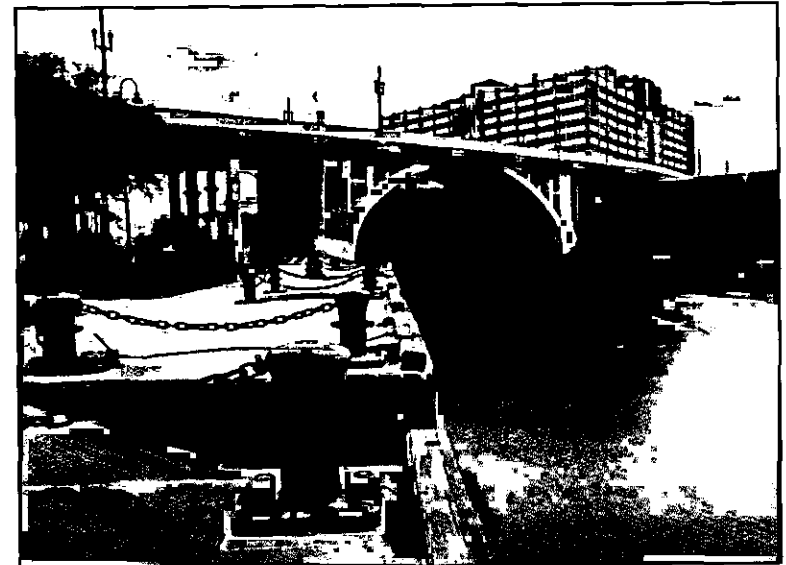
When it comes to conveying their studies, the emphasis is again on empiricism. From early on, the CLUI's publications and exhibitions brought

11 Francis Bacon, *Francis Bacon: The New Organon* (West Nyack, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 28.

12 Ibid., 38.

13 Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," in Robert Lebel, *Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 78.

people's attention to exemplary and unusual uses of land by simply recording them. A 1997 exhibition at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, *Hinterland: A Voyage into Exurban Southern California*, consisted of documentary photographs that, as Frank Gohlke or other New Topographics photographers might describe it, have a "passive frame." That is, "rather than the picture having been created by the frame, there is a sense of the frame having been laid on an existing scene without interpreting it very much."<sup>14</sup> The text that accompanies the photographs in CLUI publications



Sabine Promenade along Buffalo Bayou in downtown Houston.

often reads like an educational brochure from a chamber of commerce or natural history museum.<sup>15</sup> For example, the text on Plaster City says, "This plant at Plaster City is one of the largest gypsum plants in the country, and is owned by U.S. Gypsum, a company that manufactures more than half of the drywall in the United States. The source of the gypsum is the Fish Creek

14 William Jenkins, Introduction, in *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* (Carlsle, Massachusetts: Pentacle Press, 1975), 5.

15 The administrative aesthetic relates to the history of conceptual art; see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105–143. For more on photoconceptualism, see Pamela M. Lee, "The Austerlitz Effect: Architecture, Time, Photoconceptualism," in Douglas Fogle, *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960–1982* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003), 185–194.

mine."<sup>16</sup> By offering only slivers of compartmentalized information in pictures and captions, the CLUI indicates that an understanding of the hinterland is more than the sum of its parts and pushes us to consider the big picture.

The CLUI's straightforward language in other instances has a tone that ranges from the humorous—such as the entry on Felicity, Center of the World, that reads "Though it could be said that the surface of a spherical planet could have an infinite number of 'centers,' this is the only Center of the World officially recognized as such by the Imperial County Board of Supervisors"—to the ominous—such as the entry on the 1928 San Francisquito Dam Failure Site, where 450 people were killed when the dam broke. The entry states that "William Mulholland,...[who] was responsible for the dam's design, inspected the dam twelve hours before the disaster and declared it safe. He retired soon after the accident and stated that he envied the dead."<sup>17</sup>

As they have done with many exhibitions that followed, the Center for Land Use Interpretation conducted bus tours of the sites highlighted in *Hinterland* during its run.<sup>18</sup> Coolidge compares the bus to a vitrine: "Bus tours...are like curatorial odysseys. Since you can't put the place/artifacts in a vitrine, you take the vitrine to them."<sup>19</sup> The practice of setting up a dialectic between an exhibition in a museum and the place that exhibition highlights harkens back to Robert Smithson and his concept of Site/Non-site. When author Jeffrey Kastner asked Coolidge about this dialectic at the heart of land art in 2005, Coolidge responded, "[For us] it's more of a trialectic—site, non-site, website—where you have this fluid electronic version of space that is a form of a non-site but is also something else. And increasingly, a lot of our efforts are being directed in mapping these sites into cartographic networks on the Web so that all this information—this multilayered portrait of America through its different land uses—can be explored in a scalable system where you can look for new relationships,

16 The Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Hinterland: A Voyage Into Exurban Southern California* (Triage Bindery, 2004), unpaginated.

17 Ibid.

18 The CLUI conducted three tours in 1997 related to the *Hinterland* exhibition; see Hooper, Coolidge, and Simons, "The Center for Land Use Interpretation Chronology," in *On the Banks of Bayou City: The Center for Land Use Interpretation in Houston* (Houston: Blaffer Gallery, 2009), 112.

19 Bree Edwards, interview with Matthew Coolidge, in *On the Banks of Bayou City: The Center for Land Use Interpretation in Houston* (Houston: Blaffer Gallery, 2009), 26.

juxtapositions, and contexts based on how and where you're looking."<sup>20</sup>

In 2001, the CLUI produced *Curious Orange: Points of View of the Landscape of Orange County*, an exhibition that consisted of a multiscreen projection of a map of the county with an interactive tracking ball. Points of interest were marked with orange dots, which when clicked allowed you to learn more about that site through text and photographs. Recent exhibitions have also included CLUI-produced videos. But even as the CLUI has expanded the range of its multimedia presentations, it has stuck with its basic aesthetic of induction, which focuses on strict documentation. Its presentations are only as dramatic and beautiful as the places themselves.

The CLUI's recent exhibition *Up River: Man-Made Points of Interest on the Hudson from Battery to Troy* consisted primarily of aerial shots of sites along the Hudson River from Ellis Island to the Federal Dam. Aerial photographs have a long history that predates the advent of the airplane, and in terms of tracking land use, they have been utilized for cartography as well as covert surveillance. Aside from these authoritarian points of view, perhaps the most common overhead views of the built landscape are those of suburban tract homes, which serve as a form of social critique. As cultural studies professor Holley Włodarczyk has noted, "While young couples and growing families may have seen only the promise of their own individualized American dream-come-true in one of the seeming endless expanse of detached, single-family homes, the uniformity and scale of the view made possible by such images also practically illustrated aspects of such construction and consumption practices that architectural and social critics felt deserved their collective scorn."<sup>21</sup> But here again, the CLUI does not follow precedent. Its photographs of the Hudson do not emphasize homogeneity or waste, nor do they exemplify a certain power over that space. Instead, they show us what most people never see—private and industrial land use over time. For as Coolidge notes, "We are bound to forget what we choose not to see."<sup>22</sup>

20 Jeffrey Kastner, "True Beauty," *Artforum* (Summer 2005): 286–287. This interrelated triangle of experience includes the CLUI's extensive website, which contains a thorough collection of entries from its Land Use Database.

21 Holley Włodarczyk, "Intermediate Landscapes: Constructing Suburbia in Postwar American Photography," in *Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscapes*, Andrew Blauvelt, ed. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2008), 102.

22 Matthew Coolidge, Preface, in *Up River: Man-Made Sites of Interest on the Hudson from the Battery to Troy* (New York: Blast Books, 2008), 5.

In this way, the CLUI has built on artistic traditions of photography, land art, and conceptual art, expanding them to new multimedia, web-based technologies and striking a delicate balance between an apolitical mission and the increasingly urgent need to understand land use. At the same time, a focus on the landscape recalls a very traditional definition of art as a rendering of nature, a view championed by nineteenth-century art critic John Ruskin, who once said, "You observe that I always say *interpretation*, never *imitation*. My reason for doing this is, first, that good art rarely imitates; it usually only describes or explains. But my second and chief reason is that good art always consists of two things: first, the observation of fact; secondly, the manifesting of human design and authority in the way that fact is told."<sup>23</sup> But the CLUI has expanded the concept of factual observation of landscape beyond what Ruskin envisioned to create a view of the landscape that adheres to unbiased empirical truth above all else.

The CLUI has used a quasi-scientific method of data collection, namely induction, to shatter subjectivity and cultivate a unique aesthetic experience. When one looks at a photograph, text, or web page from the CLUI, one sees only a limited and distinct piece of the overall picture. But one is drawn into a network of interpretations surrounding land use, while at the same time having enough space and autonomy to contemplate competing interests at a distance.

In the early 1950s, sculptor Tony Smith got the chance to drive down the New Jersey Turnpike while it was being built. He wrote in 1966 about the dark road lined by industry: "The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done.... The experience of the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be pretty clear that's the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it."<sup>24</sup> The cognitive dissonance inspired by unseen aspects of the built landscape is potent now more than ever. With an unprecedented amount of information available about our country, sometimes we forget that the vast majority of land in the United States is rarely seen by the public and, in the case of the military and industry, does not like to draw attention to itself. The only way to start to understand it is to notice it and experience it.

<sup>23</sup> John Ruskin, *Selected Writings*, chosen and annotated by Kenneth Clark (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 149–150.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Wagstaff, Jr., "Talking to Tony Smith," *Arsforum* (December 1966): 19.

As this book goes to press, certain details of *Texas Oil* are still being formulated. But I expect that this, like other CLUI exhibitions, will also challenge us to go out into the world, see the things that they have seen, and come away looking at our surroundings anew. Following members of the CLUI around Houston has profoundly changed the way I understand this city's role in the oil industry. It is one thing to hear that Houston is the energy capital of the United States and quite another to see giant tankers docked next to Glendale Cemetery, where the founders of the city are buried. I had always heard that many petrochemical products are made in Houston, but I had not experienced it until I stood in Manchester Park and smelled the sweet and smoky smell of the plant nearby and saw a sign that read "Danger: Acid Line." I do not fully comprehend these juxtapositions just yet. But the CLUI has inspired me to learn more. As Matt Coolidge said one day while talking to the UH creative writing students in the mobile office trailer, "All the CLUI wants to do is make the real world seem amazing, confusing, and astounding." The rest is up to us.

Rachel Hooper

Cynthia Woods Mitchell Curatorial Fellow

Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the University of Houston